

Elmer Isler Singers bringing many cultures together with virtual concert

By **Constance Scrafield**

Conductor Lydia Adams of the famous Elmer Isler Sings (EIS) is very excited about their virtual concert Songs of Light presented online this weekend, Sunday, May 22, premiering at 4:00 p.m. and running until June 11. This is a little different from what they have produced in the past with the choir singing, accompanied visually with beautiful photographs of nature and shots of the choir themselves.

EIS is well known for singing with true clarity in other languages and in this upcoming concert they surpass themselves by presenting Songs of Light in English, Latin, Arabic and Inuktitut.

In the course of the concert Dr. Adams engages in interviews with the people who have created the music and others connected to it. Her first interview is with Eleanor Daley, Canadian composer of choral and church music. She speaks also with Mi'kmaw poet/ artist Mary Louise Martin and with Catherine Martin, Mi'kmaw Knowledge Keeper, of Millbrook First Nations, N.S. about 'grandmother moon' in the Mi'kmaw tradition. Before this concert, Dr. Adams was not acquainted with Mary Louise Martin and the whole thing of grandmother moon and now she has learned: the moon is grandmother.

In a three way telephone interview with Lydia Adams and Jessie Isler, whose late husband Elmer Isler founded the choir, they outlined the details of this concert to the Citizen. 'We're very honoured,' began Dr. Adams, 'that Catherine Martin has sung a welcome song and then Grandmother Moon.'

Following the Land Acknowledgement, the Kwa'Nu'Te: Mi'kmaw Welcome Chant sung by Catherine Martin and the opening welcome by Dr. Adams herself, the concert begins in Ukraine.

'We were going to start with the four Canadian composers. We were recording when Putin's war started and we watched Zelenski speak and under that video he recorded was this piece, the Melodia by Myroslav Skoryk; and arranged by Mykola Hobdych. It is so beautiful and we wanted to show our support for Ukraine,' Dr. Adams explained. 'So, we put it first. We have sung with the Kyiv chamber choir and many Ukrainian friends here in Toronto and elsewhere from Ukraine.'

She told us, 'We have had tremendous reaction from all over the country to that recording of Melodia.'

Her follow-up conversation is with Halyna Kvitka Kondracki, conductor of Vesnivka Ukrainian Women's Choir, Toronto with whom the EIS has frequently sung.

Sharang Sharma, tenor and Choral Scholar James T. Chestnutt is next to sing Ave Verum composed by Peter Togni the text of which is a Eucharist Chant. In their ensuing conversation with Dr. Adams, they touch on the aspect of light in church music.

'Then there is an interesting conversation about light and metaphors of light within the Muslim tradition,' said Dr. Adams. She is speaking about this with composer Hussein Janmohamed and Amiralibhai, Head of Performing Arts, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto.

The songs in Arabic are Nur: Reflections on Light by Hussein Janmohamed; Light Unveiled; Light Suspended.

'We were excited about them allowing us to photograph an ancient Koran [in the Aga Khan Museum] that has the script of the verse of the light,' she related.

Along with the music of light and the conversations with fascinating people writing and singing these songs, there is an arts display.

Marie Louise Martin has sent some of her grandmother moon art work to put into the video.

Said Jessie Isler, "It's been very exciting to include these talks and photography in addition to the concert. It's been a very uplifting one. When you see it, you will really enjoy that."

Composer Jason Jestadt and Rosie Piercy, an Inuktitut educator in Hopedale, Labrador converse with Dr. Adams. For Mr. Jestadt's composition At Night, the Valley Dreams of Snow, in which he used as text Inuktitut words for snow and ice in various forms. Amy Dodington is the soloist.

"Jason agreed to talk about the words, how they bring together the composer and the poet. It was lovely to talk about the poet and the inspiration for the poem, an amazing conversation," Dr. Adams commented. "This is the second last piece in the program."

From the Balkans comes a piece titled Long Road, written by Latvian poet Paulina Barda.

"Composer Erik Enevold talks about Paulina Barda, about her story and shows us a picture of the poet with a babe in arms in a rustic scene and she wrote this beautiful poem for her husband and he died. He is the light in the sky," Dr. Adams told the Citizen.

Inviting the public to enjoy the concert and conversations, she said, "The music is so rich and the conversations are so interesting. It has been wonderful to bring these poets together and from many cultures and how they are seeking the same things - we are all people."

Bryan Estabrooks did the production, recording the audio and the video, putting it altogether for the EIS. Dr. Adams commented that he is someone "who really knows what I'm trying to achieve and he reaches for the highest production."

The concert premier Elmer Isler Sings' Songs of Light is on May 29 at 4:00 p.m. and online for an extended period of time to June 11; it is available for people to tune in at their own time table.

"People could hear it again," suggested Ms. Isler.

Entrance is by donation, which contributes to the work of the choir and gives front row seats on May 29 and to June 11.

June 12 the EIS presents their Strawberries and Champagne at Home.

Check out all the details at www.elmerislersingers.com